

FILM
CULTURE

IN TRANSITION

BEYOND THE ESSAY FILM

SUBJECTIVITY, TEXTUALITY
AND TECHNOLOGY

EDITED BY

JULIA VASSILIEVA
DEANE WILLIAMS

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Beyond the Essay Film



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*Edited by
Julia Vassilieva
and Deane Williams*

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To the memory of Thomas Elsaesser



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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	9
Introduction	11
<i>Julia Vassilieva and Deane Williams</i>	
1. 35 Years On: Is the 'Text', Once Again, Unattainable?	33
<i>Raymond Bellour</i>	
2. To Attain the Text. But Which Text?	49
<i>Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin</i>	
3. Compounding the Lyric Essay Film: Towards a Theory of Poetic Counter-Narrative	75
<i>Laura Rascaroli</i>	
4. 'Every love story is a ghost story': The Spectral Network of Laurie Anderson's <i>Heart of a Dog</i> (2015)	95
<i>Deane Williams</i>	
5. Lines of Interpretation in Fields of Perception and Remembrance: The Multiscreen Array as Essay	111
<i>Ross Gibson</i>	
6. Deborah Stratman's <i>The Illinois Parables</i> (2016): Intellectual Vagabond and Vagabond Matter	121
<i>Katrin Pesch</i>	
7. Rethinking the Human, Rethinking the Essay Film: The Ecocritical Work of <i>The Pearl Button</i>	141
<i>Belinda Smail</i>	
8. Montage Reloaded: From Russian Avant-Garde to the Audiovisual Essay	165
<i>Julia Vassilieva</i>	
9. 'All I have to offer is myself': The Film-Maker as Narrator	189
<i>Richard Misek</i>	



10. The Shudder of a Cinephiliac Idea? Videographic Film Studies Practice as Material Thinking <i>Catherine Grant</i>	199
11. The Home Movie as Essay Film: On Making Memory Posthumously <i>Thomas Elsaesser †</i>	215
Index	241



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Introduction

Julia Vassilieva and Deane Williams

The essay film is in the spotlight. The last 25 years or so saw an explosion in audiovisual productions from across the globe that belong to this lineage. Ushered in by the watershed moment of Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* (1998), other prominent examples of this recent development include Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I* (2000), Thom Andersen's *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003), Victor Erice's *La Mort Rouge* (2006), Patricio Guzmán's *Nostalgia for the Light* (2010), John Akomfrah's *The Stuart Hall Project* (2013), John Hughes' *The Archives Project* (2013), and Chantal Akerman's *No Home Movie* (2015). But we can also think of Hito Steyerl's *How Not to be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational* (2014), Boris Groys' *Thinking in Loop* (2008), Richard Misek's *Rohmer in Paris* (2013), and the critical audiovisual essay work of Kevin B. Lee, Catherine Grant, Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin, Kogonada, Christian Keathley, and Jason Mittel. Another index of the current reinvention of interest in the essay film is demonstrated by the elevation of 'essayistic' documentaries in polls like the Greatest Documentaries of All Time. For example, in 2014, Dziga Vertov's *The Man with the Movie Camera* (1929) was rated first in *Sight & Sound's* poll, with Chris Marker's *San Soleil [Sunless]* (1983) in second place. As Brian Winston points out, this rating indicates much about the current status of the essayistic tradition: 'Subjectivity is no longer forbidden to the documentarist. The Vertovian tradition opens the door to it and subjective "essayists" have, the poll insists, walked through in triumph. Varda, Marker, Guzmán, for example, not only appear in the top 10 but they start to dominate.'¹

This increased visibility of the essay film has been followed by the reciprocal intensification of film and media scholarship, including such signal contributions as Catherine Lupton's *Chris Marker: Memories of the Future* (2004), Michael Renov's *The Subject of Documentary* (2004), Thomas

¹ Brian Winston, 'The Greatest Documentaries of All Time: The *Sight and Sound* 2014 Poll', *Studies in Documentary Film* 8.3 (2014), pp. 267-272 (p. 270).

Elsaesser's *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sightlines* (2004), Timothy Corrigan's *The Essay Film: From Montaigne to Marker* (2011), Nora M. Alter's *Chris Marker* (2006), and Laura Rascaroli's *The Personal Camera* (2009) and *How the Essay Film Thinks* (2017). More recently, Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan's *Essays on the Essay Film* (2017) has anthologized key writings in the history of essay-film criticism to firmly establish the field, while Brenda Hollweg and Igor Krstić's *World Cinema and the Essay Film* (2019) foregrounded the transnational reach of the format. These works have advanced the theorization of the essay film, attending to the issues of definition, classification, and the historical changes of the format. While stressing the difficulties of providing an exhaustive definition, scholars generally agree that the essay film occupies a liminal position between fiction, non-fiction, and experimental film; that, as a form, it is transgressive and heretical, both in terms of respecting genre boundaries and established authorities; that it is distinguished by the presence of subjective vision, authorial voice, and reflexive standpoint; and that it mobilizes a specific form of address, granting to the viewer a more involved and critical position.

Our volume represents both a part of and a critical assessment of this recent upsurge of interest in the essay film. Raising the issue of 'the beyond' of the essay film, we aim both to mark this moment of saturation in the production of and reflection on the essay film and to speculate on the possible future of the format. Yet, it is not an attempt to 'take stock' or to suggest that the essay film form has exhausted its generative potential. On the contrary, we aim to follow the lead of Mikhail Bakhtin, who wrote about *finalising* and *initiating* art-forms, urging us to attend closely to the seeds of future developments which can be discerned in the present aesthetic configurations and thus putting in practice the 'embryonic approach'.² Stressing the continuous relevance of Bakhtin's ideas at the turn of the 21st century, Mikhail Epstein (2004) has reiterated the productive value of theorising historical changes not in terms of *post* (postmodern, posthuman, post-industrial) but, rather, *proto*, to instigate the shift 'from finality to initiation as our dominant mode of thinking'.³ By raising the issue of 'beyond the essay film', we thus seek to speculate about its possible transformation as we move forward into the uncharted waters of the 21st – digital – century. We focus on three specific axes that underpin and shape the articulation

2 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 139.

3 Mikhail Epstein, 'The Unasked Question. What Would Bakhtin Say?', *Common Knowledge* 10 (1) (2004), pp. 42-60 (p. 46).



of the essay film as a specific cultural form – subjectivity, textuality, and technology – to explore how changes along and across these dimensions affect historical shifts within essay-film practice and its relation to other types of cinema and neighbouring art forms. In our introduction, we outline the pivotal role of subjectivity, textuality, and technology in the understanding of the essay-film format, demonstrating how analysis along these three lines opens the way for articulating the potential of the essay film for epistemic enquiry, political critique, and ethical reflexion; we also introduce the questions that contributions to this volume address.

As Timothy Corrigan, Ross Gibson, and others have pointed out so clearly, the genealogy of the essay film can be best understood in relation to writing: Michel Montaigne, Jorge Luis Borges, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno. In his *The Essay Film*, Corrigan proposes that ‘the most recognizable origin of the essay is the work of Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592)’.⁴ In setting out his own essayist lineage, Corrigan places Montaigne at the beginning of a literary mode of writing, something he terms ‘an evolution from Montaigne to the essay film’ that, for him, includes James Baldwin, Susan Sontag, Borges, and Umberto Eco, but also ‘drawings, sketches [...] even in musical forms’ as well as ‘photo-essays, essay films, and the electronic essays that permeate the Internet as blogs and other exchanges within a public electronic circuitry’.⁵

Yet, Montaigne proves to be significant not only for the development of an essayistic textual format, but also for the demonstration of how the very birth of subjectivity as a cultural and historical phenomenon is predicated on specific literary ways of shaping and expressing it. In his ‘What Do I Know?: Chris Marker and the Essayist Mode of Cinema’, Ross Gibson invites readers to consider the relevance of Montaigne in this regard: ‘The reason that Montaigne is still so fascinating and illuminating nowadays is that he was historically placed [...] in an era of extreme change in the history of European ideas. He was a sensitive tablet upon which the complexities of a crucial phase of the history of ideas was scored.’⁶

As Gibson points out, Montaigne’s writings emerged in the late sixteenth century, a time ‘when the attitudes about subjectivity, which we now understand as the modern European ideas of personality and psychology were just beginning to develop’, as well as enormous technological shifts such

4 Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (London, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 13.

5 Corrigan, *The Essay Film*, p. 14.

6 Ross Gibson, ‘What Do I Know? Chris Marker and the Essayist Mode of Cinema’, *Filmnews* 32: 134 (Summer 1987/1988), pp. 26-32 (p. 27).



as ‘the first industrial printing presses, a time of refinement for systems of perspectival representation, and the era of the great oceanic explorations of the seafaring powers’.⁷ For Gibson, Montaigne and the essayistic mode is of interest to contemporary readers, because ‘Montaigne could discern a shift in subjectivity, therefore, toward the modern configuration which could contemplate itself as a distinct unit in a larger objective world’, of subjective, technological, and textual shifts.⁸

Subjectivity can be thought of in relation to the essay film from another angle – the genre’s dialogical structure. In ‘Le livre, aller; retour/The Book, Back and Forth’, Raymond Bellour stresses that the essay film’s specificity resides in its addressivity: it gives the right to speak – by giving the right to representation, or to the image – to a vast number of subjects within the film, and by doing so also demonstrates its ability to ‘address oneself in order to move towards others’.⁹ Reflecting on Chris Marker’s work, Bellour argues that the essay film’s ‘inner design is an address. [...] for an address is as much a destination as a mode of discourse, it is a physical or moral quality as much as an informational sign’.¹⁰ Following Bellour, Laura Rascaroli in ‘The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments’, argues that it is not only the prominent presence of the authorial I, inscribed in a distinctive enunciation position, that makes the essay film unique, but also that this personal authorial voice addresses directly a singular, concrete, embodied person and not a social subject or a generalized audience, inviting the individual into a conversation, ‘it opens up problems and interrogates the spectator’.¹¹ Such conversation is only partially scripted, and therefore is always unfinished and open. Meanwhile, Timothy Corrigan defines the essay film as ‘figuration of thinking or thought as a cinematic address and a spectatorial response’.¹² This connection between the essay film and dialogue might prove decisive not only in understanding the formal qualities of the genre, but also in unpacking the imbrication of the essayistic, subjective, and, perhaps, most importantly – its ethical implications.

For Paul Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative*, dialogue represents ‘a radically different structuring principle’ from monologue and marks the ‘final threshold’ of narrativity, beyond which the mechanics of mimesis – of actions,

7 Gibson, ‘What Do I Know?’, p. 27.

8 Gibson, ‘What Do I Know?’, p. 27.

9 Raymond Bellour, ‘The Book, Back and Forth’, p. 111.

10 Raymond Bellour, ‘The Book, Back and Forth’, pp. 112–113.

11 Laura Rascaroli, ‘The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments’, *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 49. 2 (2008), pp. 24–47 (p. 35).

12 Laura Rascaroli, ‘The Essay Film’, p. 30.



characters, thoughts, and feelings – become abandoned.¹³ In dialogue, the principle of a coexistence of voices substitutes for the temporal configuration of actions. Consequently, the dialogical organisation brings with it the factor of incompleteness, condemning a composition itself to remain unfinished. This radical shift from monological narration, or history, to dialogical synchrony reconfigures textual structures while opening up new ways for the understanding of subjectivity; as Ricoeur enthuses, ‘But who ever said that narrative was the first and last word in the presentation of consciousnesses and their worlds?’¹⁴

Indeed, for Mikhail Bakhtin in *The Dialogical Imagination*, the dialogical relationship with the other is a necessary condition for the very emergence of subjectivity: I need the other because the other will give form and meaning to my life, an acknowledgment and confirmation of my existence. Likewise, Bakhtin sees aesthetic activity as a form-giving activity, through which subjects actively produce each other. It gives a spatial, temporal, and axiological centre to one’s self. By ‘embracing’ the content of one’s life from outside, it externalizes and thus embodies subjectivity – it makes the subject exist. For Bakhtin, then, the other is a necessary condition of the self, and dialogue functions as a principal mechanism of *properly being* human in the world: we come to ourselves through such encounters with others.¹⁵ Yet, a dialogical encounter is predicated on the incommensurability of different human worlds and such incommensurability cannot be resolved, even dialectically, but can only presuppose a complex unity of differences. The logic of dialogue thus requires the move towards provisional synthesis, of simultaneously holding two positions without merging them into one.

Meanwhile, for Emmanuel Levinas, in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, the primacy of the other constitutes the basis of an ethical system. Just as for Bakhtin, so for Levinas, the encounter with the other becomes foundational for the theorising of ethics and, in particular, what Bakhtin calls ‘answerability’ and Levinas ‘responsibility’. Both thinkers ground ethics in otherness as something that is not only distinct from the self but that can never be assimilated by the self, in principle. As Bakhtin says, ‘there always remains an unrealized surplus of humanness’ in the dialogic interaction with others.¹⁶ For Levinas, social dialogue ‘has to be conceived as a responsibility

13 Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 2, trans. by K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984-1988), p. 97.

14 Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 2, pp. 97-98.

15 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. M. Holquist, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

16 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 37.

for the other; it might be called humanity, or subjectivity, or self'.¹⁷ Thus, if dialogical structure is, indeed, the most distinctive aspect of the essay-film form, then it makes it not only an ideal instrument of thought but also an ideal instrument for ethical reflection. This seems to be demonstrated by the history of the form, which, Paul Arthur argues, has frequently articulated 'politically charged visions'.¹⁸ That ethical reflection is deeply characteristic of the essay film is evident in its characteristic thematic foci: ranging from the politics of memory and silence to postcolonial and feminist critique, the essay film has been used extensively to address issues of freedom and oppression, law and retribution, justice and violence, gratitude and debt, erasure and forgetfulness. Lately, its scope of ethical enquiry has been enlarged to acknowledge the fullness of *otherness* and address non-human others and the environment at large. Such concerns seem to confirm Adorno's insight that 'the relationship of nature and culture is its [the essay's] true theme'.¹⁹ However, for Adorno, this relationship is not primarily about thematic focus – rather, it is about the loss of immediate access to nature as a price of developing human culture: 'The essay quietly puts an end to the illusion that thought could break out of the sphere of thesis, culture, and move into the physis, nature. Spellbound by what is fixed and acknowledged to be derivative, by artefacts, it honors nature by confirming that it no longer exists for human beings.'²⁰ Adorno's point here resonates with the current debates regarding biopolitics, which, however, would take it not as a final diagnosis, but rather as a challenge for the political thought that strives to forge new paradigms to address nature and culture, *bios* and *zoê* in such a way that would refuse 'capturing' of bare life within predetermined semantic categories, social order, and juridical injunctions.²¹ It is perhaps from this juncture that the format of the essay film offers the most promising way to think through the current problematics concerning the human-animal distinction, as well as the issues inherent in the Anthropocene and the potential ecological crisis.

In considering the essay film's epistemic potential, the discussion has to take into account the relationship between the verbal and the visual. The

17 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), p. 46.

18 Paul Arthur, 'Essay Questions: From Alain Resnais to Michael Moore', *Film Comment* 39. 1 (2003), pp. 58-63 (p. 58).

19 Theodor Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', p. 19.

20 Theodor Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', p. 11.

21 See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).



first to raise the issue was Sergei Eisenstein during his period of ‘intellectual’ montage work, notably when he conceived his bold, albeit never-realized project of filming Karl Marx’s *Capital*. In his ‘Notes for a Film of Capital’, Eisenstein argues that, while his third film, *October*, ‘presents a new form of cinema: a collection of essays on a series of themes’, *Capital* would transform this method into a new type of ‘discursive cinema’.²² At stake in that project was the ability to communicate abstract thought through the juxtaposition of images and the possibility to render arguments visually. Eisenstein suggested that it is precisely the discontinuity, the gap between different images, images and sound, the visual and verbal flows in film that creates a condition of possibility for a cinematic thought to emerge. As Christa Blümlinger would later reiterate in ‘Reading Between the Images’, the essay film operates through rupture, break, and tear.²³

For Jacques Rancière, the relationship between image and text is at the core of the greatest potential of cinema, as well as being responsible for its derailment. Rancière argued that, during the 20th century, text has tended to dominate image in cinema, accounting for what he calls the ‘thwarted cinematic fable’ – thwarted in the sense of not being able to fulfil the potential of the cinematic medium inherent in the power of image – and it is precisely the essayistic mode that proves cinema’s ability to live up to its promise – a mode that finds its paramount expression in Jean-Luc Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1998). If numerous film-makers ‘subjected the “life” of images to the immanent “death” of the text’, according to Rancière in *Film Fables*, Godard salvages ‘the history announced by a century of films, whose power slipped through the fingers of their film-makers’.²⁴ Through his work, Godard asserts the power and importance of both image and text and demonstrates that neither is reducible to the other. By juxtaposing the logic of the visual and the verbal in this way, the essay film starts functioning as a proper tool of thinking, of grasping and insight, of generating new knowledge and understanding. As Godard famously declares via intertitles in Chapter 3A of *Histoire(s) du cinéma*: ‘A thought that forms / a form that thinks.’ An underside of this statement, of course, is that thought is impossible outside of form – outside of its rendering through symbolic and expressive means.

22 Sergei Eisenstein, ‘Notes for a Film of Capital’, trans. by Annette Michelson, Jay Leyda, and Maciej Sliwowski, *October* 2 (Summer, 1976), pp. 3-26 (p. 9).

23 Christa Blümlinger, ‘Reading Between the Images’, in *Documentary across Disciplines*, edited by Erika Balsom and Hila Peleg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), pp. 73-91.

24 Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables* (London: Berg, 2006), p. 171.

This is also what Theodor Adorno stresses in 'The Essay as Form': in considering the epistemological possibilities of the essay form, it is important to remember that it takes the mediated nature of thinking as its condition and its horizon. 'It does not insist on something beyond mediations.'²⁵ Even though 'for the essay all levels of mediation are immediate until it begins to reflect', this makes the fact that the essay can only operate through 'the historical mediation in which the whole society is sedimented' only more obvious.²⁶ As such, the essayistic mode is mediated through different modalities: language, conceptual frameworks, categories, and notions but also through physical apparatuses of self-expression and communication – whether paper and pen or camera and film.

The evolution of essay-film production thus has to be considered in relation to changing cinematic technologies and techniques. The emergence of handheld cameras, which granted new mobility and access to subject matter, provided a major boost for the explosion of essay films in the 1960s in the wake of the emergence of what François Truffaut called *la politique des Auteurs* and the rise of *cinéma vérité*. Similarly, new digital methods of film-making open up rich possibilities for essay-film practice and its conceptualisation, by democratising not only production, distribution, and circulation of media products, but also facilitating critical engagement with film on an unprecedented scale. The rise of the audiovisual scholarly essay over the last ten years is just one, albeit arguably the most fascinating, development in this context.

However, the digital shift also mounts new challenges to the theorisation of the essay film. Central to these theoretical debates has been the question of the digital medium's realism. Compromising the causal or existential connections between images and their referents, digital technology also endangers the image's long-assumed, as well as long-contested, ability to provide direct access to reality and its consequent ability to make truth claims. Yet, the debates about medium ontology might be fundamentally misplaced: as Stephen Prince argues in 'True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory', 'digital imaging exposes the enduring dichotomy in film theory as a false boundary'.²⁷ Given the problematisation of the category of truth in postmodern debates in the humanities more generally (which lately found an uncanny echo in the new media economy termed 'post-truth'), the issue of

25 Theodor Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', in *Notes to Literature*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 11.

26 Theodor Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', p. 11.

27 Stephen Prince, 'True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory', *Film Quarterly* 49. 3 (Spring, 1996), pp. 27-37 (p. 34).



truth arises as one of the key loci in which the form of the essay film proves its increasing relevance at the beginning of the 21st century. The continuous powerful engagement of the format of the essay film with the idea of truth post digital transformation demonstrates that the unique film ontology can never serve as the grounds of truth by virtue of the cinematic image's veracity and authenticity, but rather, as Badiou argues, it is precisely the inherent aporia between 'being' and 'appearing' that guarantees that the issue of truth will remain at the very centre of the medium-specific concerns.²⁸ This confirms the profundity of Adorno's insight that, while the 'essay thought divests itself of the traditional idea of truth' as a utopian vision of clarity and completeness, it opens up a way of facing the truth of non-identity, incompleteness, and the fragmentary nature of the world, providing a means of engaging with the truth-project from a non-essentialist perspective.²⁹

The digital shift reinforces another tendency, which, as thinkers from Eisenstein to Badiou have argued, has always been present in cinema: its impurity, or multimedial nature. From the early days of cinema theory, the idea that cinema would incorporate and integrate previously existing arts – literature, painting, music, theatre, ballet – has been prominent, but it is as a result of the injection of a new degree of digitally afforded freedom in incorporating elements and layers of various cultural expressions, as well as spreading the moving image to new platforms and screens, that the notion of intermediality has gained fresh currency in film studies. The essay film is arguably the form that has put the digital possibilities of intermedial work to maximal use: essay films not only frequently incorporate excerpts from other films, television footage, and theatrical and ballet performances, but also tend to commingle intertitles and newspaper clippings, diagrams and photographs, images of paintings and sculptures, justifying their usage by way of intertextual references, archival testimonies, or poetic association. Alexander Kluge's magisterial nine-and-a-half-hour film *Nachrichten aus der ideologischen Antike – Marx/Eisenstein/Das Kapital* (*News from Ideological Antiquity: Marx /Eisenstein/Capital*) (2008), provides one of the exemplary demonstrations of how intermediality, enabled by the digital shift, expands possibilities of the essay film.³⁰

But other examples demonstrating the imbrication of subjectivity, textuality, and technology in the essay film abound. It was the digital turn

28 Alain Badiou, *Cinéma* (Oxford: Polity, 2013), p. 207.

29 Theodor Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', p. 11.

30 See also Julia Vassilieva, "Capital and Co: Kluge, Eisenstein, Marx", *Screening the Past*, Issue 31, 2011, Web.

that enabled Alexander Sokurov to produce his monumental *Russian Ark* (2002) all in one famous extra-long take of 90 minutes, and thus to embody the aporia of mobilising the cutting-edge technology of reproduction to amplify the aura of the classical art. Though dealing with a different subject matter, the same aporia is at the core of Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I* (2000), which explores subjectivity in the digital age, on the cusp of the new millennium. As Homay King points out, following Adorno, Varda's film is a paradoxical film that deals with the relationship between digital and material cultures: 'a film in an [then] ultra contemporary format that is concerned with the expired and out of date'.³¹ In this paradox, it is also possible to see the capturing of a cultural moment where the obsolete and the discarded are, for Varda, very much part of her world, as is digital video. This paradoxical culture is rendered effortlessly, affectively, working, as Annette Hamilton tells us,

with connections in a ripple effect. Images and sequences lead in many directions. Varda's reality is cultural and she explores the cultural phenomenon of gleaning, through painting, through the history of cinema, through provincial life, urban asylum seekers and psychoanalysis. Ethics, the legal code, self-scrutiny and parody all jostle for position with the sweet taste of a ripened fig, the beauty of an afternoon light in an apple orchard and the experience of old age.³²

This jostling Hamilton describes is redolent of the essayist mode in the digital era, but it is also a quality with which the mode prefigured the digital era, lending itself well to the era. In this regard, an essay film like *The Gleaners and I* mirrors the networked exchange of subjectivity, in relation to whatever is at hand, the digital bricolage at our fingertips.

Arguably, though, nowhere is the potent imbrication of subjectivity, textuality, and technology in the essay film demonstrated as persuasively than in the work of Chris Marker. While *Letter from Siberia* (1959), *La Jetée* (1962), *Le Joli Mai* (1963), and others signaled the playful, ironic, and subjective nature of Marker's oeuvre, with the release of *San Soleil* [*Sunless*] in 1983, the full force of Marker's work as mediated thinking became apparent. A complicated play of fiction and non-fiction with possible topics such as

31 Homay King, 'Matter, Time, and the Digital: Varda's *The Gleaners and I*', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 24 (2007), pp. 421-429 (p. 421).

32 Annette Hamilton, 'The Poetics of a Potato: Documentary That Gets Under the Skin', *Metro* [Australia] 137 (2003), pp. 126-131 (p. 129).

Iceland, Japan, San Francisco, Cape Verde, and Paris in the service of ineffable meta-themes such as memory, history, subjectivity, and cinema, *San Soleil* set a compass point for subjective cinema and documentary form, its closing images dissolving into electronic art, pure representation circa 1983. This historical point sees Marker at the cusp of electronic computer-generated representation, drawing on his own subjective history of 16mm filming and writing to fashion a persona, a film-maker, Sandor Krasna, through whom to essay modern subjectivity.

Following *San Soleil's* rendering of subjectivity at the dawn of the computer age, of a bunch of topics circling around a peripatetic, ruminative subject, it is possible to see the emergence of the World Wide Web, domestic computing, and hypertext in the late 1980s as a key moment in the essayistic tradition. In the years immediately succeeding the release of *San Soleil*, scholars sought not just to produce traditional scholarly work – essays, books, papers – but to engage productively with the possibilities the film and the moment in which it was released opened up. The 1980s saw the emergence of digital hypertext; in particular, Apple's Hypercard, released in 1987, saw the domestic enthusiasm for database, hypermedia, and hypertext – as components of what was termed 'new media' – increase exponentially. One example which saw the coincidence of this new media and the ensuing engagement with Marker and *San Soleil* was Adrian Miles' *Chris Marker World Wide Web Site*, an early interactive, collaborative, hypertextual database of words and audiovisual materials devoted to Marker. This scholarly site saw the melding of critical practice (the site was developed from Miles' PhD) and hypertext networking that draws on the essayistic tenor of Marker's work grounded in the emergent technology and subjectivity of the 1980s.³³

In 1997, Marker himself made a signal contribution to this lineage again with his millennial CD-ROM, *Immemory*. In many ways, as Raymond Bellour points out in 'Le livre, aller; retour/The Book, Back and Forth', *Immemory* is a summation, a 'repository of an oeuvre and a life which have taken this century as a memory palace for all the world's memories', at the same time as it belongs to the tradition we have been sketching here, 'between the path of Montaigne [...] and the path of Barthes', where Marker '[...] invents an ambiguous path, which has as much to do with the logic of the media involved as with his need to write the rules of his own game.'³⁴ Here,

33 Adrian Miles, *Chris Marker World Wide Web Site*, archived at [<http://vogmae.net.au/works/marker/index.html>].

34 Raymond Bellour, 'The Book, Back and Forth', in Lauren Roth and Raymond Bellour, *Qu'est-Ce Qu'une Madeleine? A Propos du CD-Rom Immemory by Chris Marker: Essays by Lauren Roth and*

Bellour commingles Marker's oeuvre, and his fictional self-realisation, with the possibilities afforded by this millennial platform. In seeking an understanding of *Immemory* in relation to Marker's earlier works, Bellour re-examines André Bazin's seminal review of *Letter from Siberia* (1962), in which 'Bazin invokes the idea of "horizontal editing" which moves not from one shot to the next one, but laterally as it were, to what is said about it'.³⁵ For Bellour, Bazin's description 'underestimates the degree to which, in this address, the image has its own force of intelligence, its own gaze, even if it owes them to the speech that spurs on'.³⁶ Bellour then understands *Immemory's* procedure as a condition of the CD-ROM:

This feeling that image speaks to us is perhaps even stronger in *Immemory*, where Marker is content to simply write on the screen that is no longer a screen, where the image seems to arrive immediately at the whim of the gestures by which we summon it. The feeling stems from the technical apparatus, its free and available address, whereby we close ourselves up with the author in a new pact between viewer and reader.³⁷

As Bellour suggests, *Immemory* belonged to a broader utilisation of the technology as well as, invoking Umberto Eco, 'an open work, or rather, a work in motion, *Immemory* is perhaps above all a work in expansion' as it is transformed on an Internet site.³⁸ This dynamic and transitive apparatus, at once culminative and all-encompassing, recalls characterisations of Marker's earlier *La Jetée* (1962), and *Sunless*, as well as prefiguring later network models.

As this discussion demonstrates, the essay film emerged as an heir to the essayistic literary mode critically implicated in the formation of modern subjectivity with its apparent interiority and singularity. Subjectivity, by way of being both expressed and constructed through the essay film, through the creation of a specific enunciation modality, through the use of first-person address, and by differentiating film essays from other, more objective or neutral forms of cinematic discourse is rightly acknowledged as one of the main distinctive features of this type of film-making. At the same time, the essay-film modality, with its noted protean tendencies and voracious appetite

Raymond Bellour (Paris: Yves Gevaert Éditeur/Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997), pp. 124-125.

35 Raymond Bellour, 'The Book, Back and Forth', p. 112.

36 Raymond Bellour, 'The Book, Back and Forth', p. 112.

37 Raymond Bellour, 'The Book, Back and Forth', p. 112.

38 Raymond Bellour, 'The Book, Back and Forth', p. 112.



in the cannibalisation of other cultural forms – literature, photographs, other films by way of quotation or pastiche – arguably represents an expression of postmodern subjectivity par excellence. As we enter the 21st century and move, in the view of some scholars, to modernism after postmodernism, presumably seeking once again to re-establish the boundaries around the subject and subjectivities, this volume seeks to hypothesize what new forms the writing and performing of subjectivity through the essay film will take. Furthermore, it seeks to investigate how this symbiotic relationship between subjectivity and textuality in the essay film penetrates and troubles other forms of film-making in the 21st century – from documentary to narrative feature film.

If subjectivity places the essay film into a specific relationship with the world and our being in the world, textuality bears significantly on the essay film's form and the kind of epistemological work that this type of film-making is uniquely suited to pursue. The essay film has been placed in both reciprocal and antagonistic relationships with such major textual forms as narrative, dialogue, and poetry, and minor forms, such as letter and diary writing. In all these different forms, the textual aspect has been functioning as the major tool allowing the essay film to work as an instrument of thinking, of grasping and insight, of generating new knowledge and understanding. At the same time, the cinematic mode of expression reshapes and purifies the very textual forms that provided a grid for the essay film in the first place. The digital shift pushes these intertwined relationships between the verbal and the visual even further. As we are coming to terms with and discovering new possibilities offered by the digital revolution, this volume suggests that it is vital to rethink what constitutes information, memory, and knowledge, reconfiguring traditional notions of authorship and spectatorship towards intensely dialogical, involved and critically ambitious notions of participatory media, interactivity, the prosumer, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence.

Each chapter in this collection engages (to various degrees) with the three parameters foregrounded in the subtitle of the volume: subjectivity, textuality, and technology. Balancing theoretical discussions and film case studies, the authors address the transformation of the essay film from historical, thematic, aesthetic, ethical, and self-reflexive perspectives.

The collection opens with two chapters that face textuality squarely. In the first chapter, '35 Years On: Is the "Text", Once Again, Unattainable?', Raymond Bellour reflects on his own classic 1975 essay 'The Unattainable Text'. Moving into the 21st century, Bellour considers the paradoxical situation of cinematic art and film studies in the present, digital era: the filmic text may

have become greatly 'accessible' (via DVD, etc.) and freezable, but is it truly 'graspable' in a more profound sense? By analysing cross-medial works by Michael Snow, Bill Viola, Danielle Vallet Kleiner, and James Coleman, as well as prominent examples of the scholarly 'video essay' format, Bellour gestures to the ways in which cinema, and the special experience of cinema, remain, in his terms, fundamentally and tantalisingly an 'unattainable' phenomena.

'The Unattainable Text' also serves as a point of departure for Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin's chapter 'To Attain the Text. But which Text?'. Álvarez López and Martin note that, whereas the film-text was once indomitably *introuvable* (Bellour's original word) to scholars and artists alike – variously unfindable, inaccessible, unreachable, unquotable, unmanipulable – now the situation seems to have changed, placing the cinematic text within our direct reach. However, Álvarez López and Martin caution, there are challenges in 'The Unattainable Text' that are conveniently overlooked in this optimistic interpretation arising from our present era, and their essay teases out these challenges. Attending to a semantic complexity at work in Bellour's piece, they explicate three different, principal meanings attached to the word *text*. Most simply, there is text in the empirical sense: an object, in this case, a film. Then there is text as synecdoche for language, especially written language. Finally, there is text in the expanded, semiotic, post-structuralist sense that Roland Barthes and many others gave the term at the end of the 1960s: the text as a 'methodological field', a weave of signifying processes.³⁹ To attain this third type of text in the name of cinema and its creative analysis, Martin and Álvarez López argue, it cannot be a straightforward procedure of downloading and re-editing digital files. Their essay explores what more is at stake, theoretically and practically, which we need to make explicit in today's discussion of the audiovisual essay – an exploration that draws on a range of historical examples as well as their own experience of producing audiovisual essays.

The next two chapters shift their emphasis towards subjectivity. In 'Compounding the Lyric Essay Film: Towards a Theory of Poetic Counter-Narrative', Laura Rascaroli explores the genre of lyric or poetic essay. Rascaroli notes that, while lyricism is acquiring increasing relevance as one of the key modes adopted by an artistic practice that is spreading fast throughout the globe, as a type of the essay film, it is still substantially undertheorized. Rascaroli speculates that this may be explained by the impression that affect and sublimity are at odds with the essay's characteristic

39 Raymond Bellour 'The Unattainable Text', trans. by Ben Brewster, in *The Analysis of Film* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), pp. 21-27, (p.21).

rationalism. By contrast, she proposes to look at lyricism not as separate from, or subordinate to, logical thinking, but rather as enmeshed with and contributing to argumentation. Her discussion focusses on a case study, the essayistic cinema of contemporary Italian film-maker Pietro Marcello. Characterized by a distinctive syncretism of realism and elegy, Marcello's cinema mobilizes the lyric not as stylistic cypher, but rather as a means to produce thought-images and meanings associated with affect. Drawing on Marcello's cinema's counter-narrative lyricism and its elegiac temporality, Rascaroli's chapter refines our understanding of the relationship between narration, lyricism, and argument in the essay film.

Deane Williams's chapter "Every Love Story is a Ghost Story": The Spectral Network of Laurie Anderson's *Heart of a Dog* (2015)' focusses on another example of the film essay produced in a poetic vein. While Anderson's film has been described as 'a paean to a canine friend',⁴⁰ 'a meditation on love and loss',⁴¹ and a collection of 'eccentric musings on the evasions of memory, the limitations of language and storytelling',⁴² Williams argues that the film can also be understood as a network of ghost stories. Drawing on Anderson's idiosyncratic multimedia technique and conceptualisation of the future, Williams explores the ways in which the figures of 9/11, Lou Reed, David Foster Wallace, Gordon Matta-Clark, and the Bardo thread through *Heart of a Dog*. Exploring the implications of the juxtaposition of these themes and Anderson's oeuvre, including her live performance work and the Downtown New York artistic milieu she emerged from. Williams positions the film in relation to a confluence of network theory and hauntology as a particular rendering of 21st century subjectivity.

More radical forms of non-linear organisation of the essay film – brought about by technological affordances – are explored by Ross Gibson in his chapter 'The Non-Linear Treatment of Disquisition: Multiscreen Installation as Essay'. Gibson's analysis is prompted in the first instance by the gallery demonstration of Sokurov's *Spiritual Voices* (1980-1995), the essay film that documents the loneliness, tedium, and fear in the life of a squadron patrolling the battle lines of the USSR's war with Afghanistan. Initially designed to be shown in a consecutive format, the five episodes of *Spiritual Voices* were presented on rare occasions as an installation displaying all five parts simultaneously and continuously on separate screens. Gibson

40 Steve Rose. 'Heart of a Dog Review: Paean to a Canine Friend', *The Guardian*, 29 May 2016, Web.

41 Susan M. Pollak. 'A Meditation on Love and Loss: Laurie Anderson's *Heart of a Dog*', *Psychology Today*, 17 June 2017, Web.

42 Justin Chang. Film Review: *Heart of a Dog*, *Variety*, 4 September 2015, Web.

argues that the complex multiscreen and polyphonous version changed the emotional dynamics, conceptual understanding, and embodied reactions of the viewers, evoking the convulsive, non-linear experience of war much more vividly than linear presentation. Taking Sokurov's installation as a point of departure, Gibson examines the affordances of multiscreen installation in a documentary context. Also drawing on other works such as Doug Aitken's *Eraser*, Chantal Akerman's gallery version of *From the East*, this chapter analyses the insights that can be garnered from spatialized, multistranded exposition, as distinct from a conventional, long-form essay film viewed in a linear development. To grasp the complexity of the affects and 'messages' in the installation works, Gibson mobilizes Benjamin Libet's theories of consciousness and the 'ecology of mind' principles articulated by Gregory Bateson.

If 'ecology of mind' serves as one of the methodological approaches in Gibson's chapter, the next two chapters place ecology at the centre of their inquiry. In 'Deborah Stratman's *The Illinois Parables* (2016): Intellectual Vagabond and Vagabond Matter', Katrin Pesch proposes that, in a time of anthropogenic climate change, environment has become a contested concept in academic and public debate. Reflecting critically on the uses of ecological discourse, Pesch's chapter puts Stratman's essay film *The Illinois Parables* (2016) in dialogue with contemporary ecological thought and ecocritical approaches in film studies and investigates connections between environment and textuality. Without attending directly to environmental issues, the film evokes environment as a multifaceted, aesthetic concept that embraces natural and social surroundings and imaginaries as much as the sensuous and affective properties of filmic space. Pesch's proposal is that *The Illinois Parables* treats the essay film form itself as an environment, and she demonstrates that, in the space that it opens up between local specificity and the allegorical reach of parables, the environment is not a passive backdrop to the human drama but is the force that animates the textual properties of filmic space.

Belinda Smaill tackles the turn to the Anthropocene in the environmental humanities from a different angle in her chapter 'Rethinking the Human, Rethinking the Essay Film: The Ecocritical Work of *The Pearl Button* (2016)'. Smaill argues that, while the notion of the Anthropocene has focussed attention on anthropogenic climate change and the impact of human activity on the non-human environment, it is crucial that such a project does not cast humans as above and other to the environment, but, rather, that it acknowledges humanity's entangled relationship with species, history, and environment. This is vital for understanding how, as a species, we fit into the

world system in an age of accelerating species extinction. Smaill suggests that Patricio Guzman's *The Pearl Button* elaborates a hermeneutics attentive to the non-human, in order to offer a powerful interpretive paradigm that decentres the human subject. While *The Pearl Button* focusses on the history of Chile, precolonial cultures, and the atrocities of the Pinochet regime, it recasts this history in a way that encompasses geography and evolution, employing an associative poetic style. Smaill explores the oceanic imaginary of *The Pearl Button*, demonstrating how the film's essayist style offers a situated perspective that reflects on a history of human violence while also moving beyond the human, to place the history of Chile within a global ecosystem. As such, Smaill concludes, *The Pearl Button* offers one example of cogent film-making in the Anthropocene.

The next two chapters explore in depth one of the most promising ways of going 'beyond the essay film' that we have witnessed over the last decade – the audiovisual scholarly essay, or videographic film studies. In her chapter 'Montage Reloaded: from the Russian Avant-Garde to the Audiovisual Essay', Julia Vassilieva interrogates the relevance of early Russian montage theory and practice to new issues raised by the shift from the essay film to the audiovisual essay. Sergei Eisenstein's vision of the new type of cinema of ideas formulated in his project for filming Marx's *Das Capital*, Dziga Vertov's foregrounding of subjectivity and reflexivity in *The Man with a Movie Camera*, and Espir Shub's practice of 'compilation film' all contributed to the emergence of the essay film as – to use Godard's famous definition – 'the form that thinks'. The audiovisual essay inherits from the essay film its *raison d'être*: to deliver critical interrogation, as poignantly foreshadowed by Eisenstein; at the same time, the rich arsenal of recently produced videographic works demonstrates the relevance of Lev Manovich's argument that, while the principles of new media can be derived from *The Man with a Movie Camera*, the major challenge for digital media is not only to convey complex ideas, but to take the spectator 'along the process of thinking'. Meanwhile, the audiovisual essay's use of pre-existing footage and its creative reassembling, raising questions about the nature of authorship, harks back to Shub's polemical use of the compilation film. Vassilieva's chapter demonstrates that Russian montage cinema and theory remain critically important for the theorization of the audiovisual essay.

The next chapter, Catherine Grant's 'The Shudder of a Cinephiliac Idea? Videographic Film Studies Practice as Material Thinking', is a careful consideration of the role of audio-video essayist as a researcher. Grant is a film scholar who, in the last seven years, has taken up the challenge

of learning to produce, write about, and publish creative-critical digital-video essays related to film and media-studies subjects, essays that use footage from the films studied as well as other moving image/sounds from existing media. Her chapter here considers the pedagogical, critical, theoretical, and philosophical threads that surround the audiovisual essay as it belongs to the tradition of the essay film and as it belongs to the broader realm of creative practice.

Similar to Grant's contribution, the last two chapters are written by film scholars who have moved into creative practices and now speak from the dual position of critics and practitioners, bringing both their theoretical knowledge and practical insights to reflect on the issues of textuality, subjectivity, and technology of the essay film mode. In his chapter "All I Have to Offer is Myself": the Film-Maker as Narrator', Richard Misek zooms in on the implications of audiovisual essayism for the issue of authorship. Reflecting on his own experience of making essay films, Misek asks, provocatively, who precisely is the 'I' referenced in so many essay film voice-overs? He suggests that, while it is easy to assume that the narrative 'voice' in an essay film is that of the film-maker, the narrator's relation to the film is always ambiguous, even if the audience is, in fact, hearing the film-maker speak. Misek takes as his starting point Chris Marker's contradictory claim that all he has to offer is himself, spoken first in *Level Five* (1997), and subsequently quoted by Marker in a letter about the oblique voice-over in *Sans Soleil* (1983). Misek's chapter explores how the aspiration of open and direct address tends to be complicated through the various mediations involved in film-making. Adducing his own film, *Rohmer in Paris* (2013), Misek raises the paradoxical possibility that, while essay film-makers can only offer themselves, they are simultaneously prevented by the form of the essay film from *being* themselves.

In the final chapter, Thomas Elsaesser essays his own position of author and subject in his essay film *The Sun Island* (2017). He takes a simultaneously historical and personal approach to the story and own posthumous life of his grandfather, architect Martin Elsaesser, as it has been constructed by the research, writing, advocacy and making of the film. For Thomas Elsaesser, the process of working towards a personal documentary essay film necessitates a consideration of the 'posthumous constellation' to which the film belongs; of both an '*île de mémoire*' and *lieux de mémoire* and the historical pressures that these entail. Ultimately, it requires understanding the intensity of the relationship between the intimate private spaces of familial life and the complicated political and cultural forces that are invariably invoked when your grandfather is also a public figure.



Thomas Elsaesser passed away on the 4th of December, 2019, while we were finalizing the manuscript. This book would not have been possible without his generous support, guidance and contribution. His essay titled “On Making Memory Posthumously” now acquires an uncanny aura of premonition and anticipation. In it Thomas writes: “The condition of the posthumous implies a special relation of past to present that no longer follows the direct linearity of cause and effect, but takes the form of a loop, where the present rediscovers a certain past, to which it attributes the power to shape aspects of the future that are now our present. In other words, we are in the temporality of the posthumous, whenever we retroactively discover the past to have been prescient and prophetic, as seen from the point of view of some special problem or urgent concern in the here and now. We retroactively create a past, to assure ourselves of the possibility of a future.” While the field has lost one of its greatest, and Thomas will be missed as a great and unique mentor, colleague, collaborator and friend, his presence will endure in the sense articulated by his essay. This book itself now will become a tribute to Thomas, bringing his voice back from that impossible point of loss that we all feel so acutely.

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